Implementation of *The Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* as a Conceptual Framework in Professional Leaning Communities as they Impact/Influence Strategic Planning in Education

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ABSTRACT
To move toward educational excellence leaders, teachers, and district administrators must be strategic in planning for instructional success. As this planning takes place, I believe that the concept of *Professional Leaning Communities (PLC)* should occupy a large space in a school strategic plan for success. Strategic planning should be viewed as "Strategic Thinking" about what is working and what standards, if any, should be set in a undetermined and constant changing educational system. This task requires a large amount of communication between all stakeholders involved in the education of our children. The majority of this communication can be done though the power of professional learning communities. A crucial element to this success is the implementation of the six realms of meaning.

Introduction

Unprecedented change is taking place in schools all over the world. Schools are increasingly being managed like businesses. Without effective strategic planning principals will be involved in crisis management (Van der Linde, 2001). As schools engage in strategic planning, professional learning communities should be heavily depended on to help districts move from infancy to maturity in their quality of instructional and overall educational success. By using the Kritsonis' 2003 *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* as a guide for professional learning communities this will increase the success of professional learning communities and their impact on strategic planning.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to explore professional learning communities while taking a look at how they impact school improvement and their place in strategic planning in education. This article will address how the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (Kritsonis, 2003) is implemented in the core of professional learning communities. By utilizing the six realms in professional learning communities, leaders and teachers will be able to achieve the highest excellence possible in educational achievement.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) have over the last few years been almost a house hold name among educators of all levels. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning (Daufour, 2004). Each word of the phrase "professional learning community" has been chosen purposefully.

Dufour and Eaker state:

A "professional" is someone with expertise in a specialized field………..."Learning" suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity….. In a professional learning community, educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone (as cited in Thomas, Gregg, and Niska, 2004).

Most all professional learning communities follow the same protocol. Within each community the teacher as well as leaders is encouraged to pursue personal and professional development, integrating it as part of their regular job responsibilities. Alief ISD is an example of this, by implementing PLC time into the school week by creating a weekly early release day for students and utilizing that extra hour for mandated time for teachers to be in their specified professional learning community. Within professional learning communities, leaders have incorporated professional development by asking teachers to discuss and share differing classroom application. From those interactions, teachers are enhancing their professional knowledge in a more informal approach to professional development. True professional learning communities follow different protocols to evoke dialogue between team members. In some professional development settings, teachers are asked to read books or educational articles as a catalyst to encourage reflection, inquiry, and sharing. Individual and team judgment is valued more than rules, policies, forms, and procedures. Most importantly, everyone is encouraged to

take responsibility for their own learning and development and this is considered to be a norm of the school's culture (Thompson, 2004).

These concepts of professional leaning communities may sound simple to implement, this is not always the case. Implementing professional learning communities is challenging. For starters, they require a deep cultural change within the school (Honawar, 2008).

How Professional Learning Communities Impact School Improvement

There are cascades of strategies, theories, district initiatives, and many other ideas to improve student learning. Teacher collaboration is hailed as one of the most effective ways to improve student learning (Honawar, 2008). This can be debatable like most things in education are. According to Thomas, Gregg, and Niska (2004), many K-12 school are working to become professional learning communities in the hope that student learning will improve when adults commit themselves to talking collaboratively about teaching and learning and then take action that will improve student learning and achievement. Other leaders in the field such as Mike Schmoker (2004) believe that "…the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is building the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community" (pg. 424).

For former superintendent Richard DuFour (2004) in *Educational Leadership*, attributes the successes and record gains in his near Chicago school district to goal oriented *collaborative teams*. DuFour believed that collaborative teams were the engine behind each schools improvement efforts.

Mike Schmoker said:

> In the nearby but less advantaged Chicago Public Schools, those with strong professional learning communities were four times more likely to be improving academically than schools with weaker professional communities. We can no longer afford to be innocent of the fact that "collaboration" improves performance (pg. 431). Such simple effort — teachers teaching one another the practice of teaching — leads to what has to be one of the most salient lists of benefits in educational literature:
> - Higher-quality solutions to instructional problems,
> - Increased confidence among faculty,
> - Increased ability to support one another's strengths and to accommodate weaknesses,
> - More systematic assistance to beginning teachers, and
> - The ability to examine an expanded pool of ideas, methods, and materials (pg. 430).

I believe that an unknown author said it best, "I cannot improve my craft in isolation from others."

The Role Professional Learning Communities have in Strategic Planning

For some people, the term strategic planning brings to mind a disciplined and thoughtful process that links the values, mission, and goals of a school system with a set of coherent strategies and tasks designed to achieve those goals (Reeves, 2007). According to Weindling (1997) strategic planning "is a means for establishing and maintaining a sense of direction when

the future has become more and more difficult to predict" (as sited in Van der Linde, 2001, pg. 536).

Professional learning communities embodies this process and allows for a triangulation of planning, goal setting, and result evaluation. Communication is the element that makes strategic planning such a success. Through professional leaning communities, this element of communication is evident as teachers begin to talk and create communities that focus on the specific needs of a campus, department, or classroom.

Implementing "Symbolics" in Professional Learning Communities

The first realm of meaning is *symbolics*. "These meanings are contained in arbitrary symbolic structures, with socially accepted rules of formation and transformation, created as instruments for the expression and communication of any meaning whatsoever (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 11).

Professional Learning Communities use communication as the backbone in which its purpose is fulfilled. Within professional learning communities this first realm is evident with the "ordinary language" that is required for effective communication to take place. In all professional learning communities there is a discourse employed in the everyday speech and writing of education. Without the knowledge of this language and the knowledge of its meaning, educators within these communities cannot make progress in their journey to student improvement. A person knows a language only if he understands its meanings (Kritsonis, 2003, p.109). Gamble (2008) postulates that teachers must learn the vocabulary and apply the concepts of a PLC. They must talk the talk and walk the walk in lesson preparation and lesson presentations. Teachers must model the dynamics by stating clearly the objectives to the students, and make frequent use of formative assessments, using graphic organizers whenever possible. The use of graphic organizers is the implementation of symbols, which according to Kritsonis comprise another of the outer faces of language. These symbols are spoken sounds or written marks that convey the meaning to be communicated (Kritsonis, 2007).

The realm of symbolics expresses that different languages reflect multiple ways of organizing experiences. This is implemented in professional learning communities, by the collaboration effort between teachers as they share experiences and together organize and plan for future classroom experiences. Ordinary language presupposes a fund of common understandings about the world and a body of shareable experiences (Kritsonis, 2007, pg. 110). The common understanding and shareable experiences of classroom instruction among educators is what should be built on in professional learning communities. Educators strengthen one another by sharing with others their victories and their failures. It is only through these symbolic interactions of language can schools begin the ever so needed dialogue of what is working in our schools.

The Implementation of "Empirics" in Professional Learning Communities

The second realm empirics, includes the sciences of the physical world, of living things, and of man. These sciences provide factual descriptions, generalizations, and theoretical formulations and explanations that are based upon observation and experimentation in the world of matter, life, mind, and society (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 12).

As educators collect and analyze data from students to produce better results they are functioning in the empirical realm.

The educators involved in professional learning communities essentially become scientific researcher for what is effective and what is not effective in the instructional setting. By

becoming researchers their scientific inquiry is aimed at bringing some order and intelligibility out of what appears to be a miscellaneous and unrelated profusion of phenomena (Kritsonis, 2007). Gamble (2004) suggest that schools develop a professional library by researching the great "movers" in the field (i.e., Dufour, Hord, Martin-Kniep, Sergiovanni, and others). Acquire materials by these authors and get them into circulation.

As teachers gather data, it is important for them to remember that principles, generalizations, and laws are not directly inferred from data of observation and observations do not test the truth or falsity of hypotheses, but rather their scope and limitations. By being aware of these limitations identified by observation, educators are able to put in place future interventions for those students affected by those limitations.

The Implementation of "Esthetics" in Professional Learning Communities

"The third realm, esthetics, contains the various arts, such as music, the visual arts, the arts of movement, and literature" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 12). Esthetics looks at not only knowledge in a mathematical and empirical manner, but explores understanding that may be used for the arts and other non-empirical fields. Often students cannot be calculated in a scientific manner. There are beauties that occur in the learning of all students that can only be understood in the wholeness of the student both empirically and non-empirically. Each individual student is like a fragile art piece. Each work of art contains its own meaning and speaks for itself (p.279). By understanding the whole student and the varieties present in each student, professional learning communities can have a more holistic view and dialogue on what is working for different pieces of beautiful artwork.

It is important for educators to consistently take into consideration the differences and beauty that every student processes. Professional learning communities are a good platform for this to occur being that they are able to share experiences and assess students from differing paradigms.

The Implementation of "Synnoetics" in Professional Learning Communities

The fourth realm is synnoetics. Synnoetics refers to meanings in which a person has direct insight into other beings (or oneself) as concrete wholes existing in relation (Kritsonis, 2007). Engagement is a crucial part in having an effective professional learning community. It is the engagement between team members within the professional learning community as well as the engagement between the teacher and the student that drives the collaboration effort that in turn promotes student achievement. Kritsonis (2007) says that synnoetic meaning requires engagement and that there is no such thing as absolutely solitary existence. The very concept of isolation has significance only against a background of other from whom one is separated (Kritsonis, 2007). People may differ about how to ensure "quality," but most would agree that quality teachers know how to craft engaging and effective learning experiences, despite constant changes in student populations. They need to be knowledgeable and they need to know how to use their knowledge. Ongoing professional learning simply must be integral to their work (Wood, 2007). Educators are charged with not only educating students academically, yet also, helping them gain self knowledge and guide them in how to use both their academic knowledge as well as their self knowledge. One goal of professional learning communities is to help teachers also gain knowledge of teaching practices as well as a personal knowledge about who they are and the roles they play as educators in a school. While professional developments are great avenues for this task, most time smaller professional learning communities can be more effective. Kritsonis (2007) posits that personal knowledge is not always developed though formal instruction.

The Implementation of "Ethics" in Professional Learning Communities

Ethics, according to Dr. William A. Kritsonis, is that which "includes moral meanings that express obligation rather than fact, perceptual form, or awareness of relation" (Kritsonis, 2007, pg. 13). Morality, according to Kritsonis, is simply that "which reflects inter-subjective understanding. Morality has to do with personal conduct that is based on free, responsible, deliberate decision" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 13). As educators ethics and morality should be the ordinary language and the business of everyone. Each day parents entrust us with the lives and futures of their children. Any act or decision made for our students from the smallest of them such as school materials used to the biggest such as assessment choices should be the most moral and ethical one. Gamble (2008) suggest that one should become an instructional leader in your school by advocating, in theory and practice, one of the "best practices" models called a professional learning community.

According to Kritsonis, ethical considerations enter into every department of ordinary life. Therefore, education cannot and will not escape the responsibility of ethics, or right actions, against students. By forming professional learning communities, teachers should ensure and hold each other accountable for ethical behavior toward students. The improvement of conduct depends upon the habit, in making each decision, of bringing into consciousness a range of different possibilities from among which a selection can be made (Kritsonis, 2007). This is the essence of what a professional learning community should do.

The Implementation of "Synoptics" in Professional Learning Communities

Synoptics refers "to meanings that are comprehensively integrative" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 13). Synoptics covers the realms of "history, philosophy, and religion" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 13). Professional learning communities implement this realm of meaning with its integrative characteristics of guiding, teaching, and learning as educators.

In professional learning communities, educators must also look at the history of what has been successful in obtaining student achievement for all students. By looking at the past, educators are able to better chart their path to the future. Along with looking at the past, professional learning communities should frequently reference the vision that the school is attempting to bring to realization. At the very least, faith refers to an ideal and a hope for maximum completeness, depth, and integrity of vision (Kritsonis, 2008).

The synoptic view addresses the entire range of all that is encompassed in the expressible education experiences. Fidelity must be given to a data-driven curriculum, to clear and specific objectives, and to a mindset of deep purpose for meaningful planning and collaboration. The focus must be to move students, as well as faculty, into truly becoming lifelong learners (Gamble, 2007).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion strategic planning is imperative for school leaders to obtain gains in student achievement.

Doug Reeves (2007) stated:
> School leaders should embrace the importance of strategy by developing plans that are focused and brief and that provide consistent monitoring and evaluation. Most important, the teachers and leaders who implement strategic plans should begin the process with the confidence that their professional practices truly influence student achievement. (pg. 87)

This process can and will be enhanced through quality professional learning communities where teachers and leaders can begin effective and action oriented dialogue about student achievement and what works and what is not working in classrooms all across the nation. The continued implementation of the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* will produce more coherent results when seeking holistic achievement of students.

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